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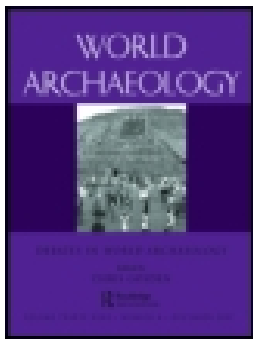
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## The multiple territories of Swahili urban landscapes

Stephanie Wynne-Jones & Jeffrey Fleisher

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## The multiple territories of Swahili urban landscapes

Stephanie Wynne-Jones<sup>a</sup> and Jeffrey Fleisher<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study; <sup>b</sup>Rice University

### ABSTRACT

Houses are linked to the urban landscape in multiple ways. They provide urban form, and shape movement and interaction. This article analyses these connections through the concept of territories, defined as areas linked to particular activities and/or groups, at the fourteenth–sixteenth-century Swahili town of Songo Mnara. Detailed excavation and survey at the site has provided information on ritual and economic activity within and between households. Here we use these data to identify inclusive territories, which served to delineate some of the communal spaces of the town and to link these with exterior landscapes and more exclusive territories linked to particular families and houses. Finally, we discuss a series of economic territories linked to production, which crosscut some of the divisions evident between elite and non-elite activities. We argue that the urban landscape can be defined and understood through the ways these territories combined and overlapped.

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## Introduction

Urban landscapes are fundamentally shaped by the structures within them; as such they are places where the relationship between house and landscape is most explicit. Yet townscapes are more than simple agglomerations of housing, and have been defined physically, socially and politically by archaeologists drawing on the diversity and importance of urban life in the past. Towns are characterized above all by their diverse population, by a mode of collective living that transcends networks of kin or possibly even acquaintance; this is enabled by differentiation of roles, as well as by formal and informal infrastructure. Urban life and the urban landscape are thus complex material and social networks.

This complexity is visible on the ground in the traces of past activities and interactions. In this article we use the concept of ‘territories’ to explore the spatiality of particular groups, material networks and practices in an urban landscape. We acknowledge that territory is a concept with intellectual baggage, often equated with an area of political jurisdiction (A. Smith 2003; M. E. Smith 2005; VanValkenburgh and Osborne 2012). Yet we use it here to try to capture the idea of an arena of activity and association, not an area of political control. Territory is a useful concept as it gives a spatial dimension to discussion of group activities, responsibilities and rights. We suggest that the urban landscape can be thought of as the site of multiple overlapping territories, which link the built environment to the broader landscape in varying ways. These urban territories are scalar, in that they unite parts of the town with different geographic extents, yet they also unite areas and

**CONTACT** Stephanie Wynne-Jones  [stephanie.wynne-jones@york.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.wynne-jones@york.ac.uk)

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groups within the town through shared practices and materials. The recognition of territories is a way of exploring the diversity of urban life in quite specific ways, by linking particular activities to particular structures and spaces. As such, territories tie houses and households to the urban landscape, not in a general way, but in empirically quantifiable units that can be mapped archaeologically and can help us to understand better the ways the diverse urban landscape was formed and maintained.

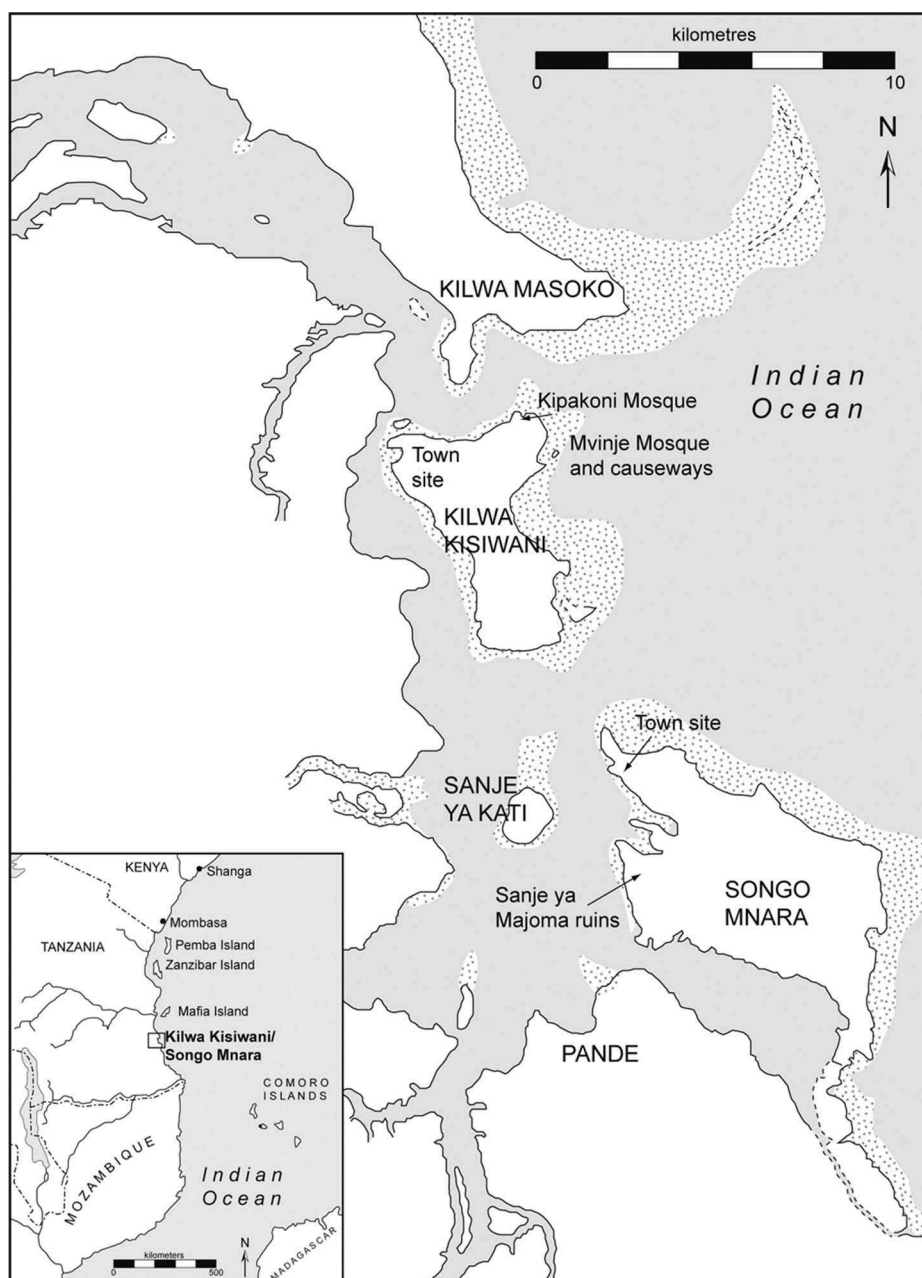
The concepts developed here were inspired by our ongoing research at the site of Songo Mnara, Tanzania. The authors jointly direct large-scale excavations at Songo Mnara, exploring the practices of everyday life in and around the buildings of a rich and elegant Swahili townscape. This research was inspired by an established literature which has recognized the interplay between top-down and bottom-up dynamics in the creation of an urban plan (M. E. Smith 2007; M. L. Smith 2003). Recent approaches to cities have also drawn on Low's (2000) distinction between the social *production* of space (the tangible aspects of the city plan) and the social *construction* of space (the historically contingent transformation of that space into place through the actions of human actors). These approaches shaped work at Songo Mnara, methodologically and conceptually, as we sought to treat the town as a continuous space rather than dealing only with the urban plan as defined by the built environment. Urban archaeology has only rarely explored the possibilities for investigating movement between internal and external space, despite successful methods being applied to village communities (Robin 2013).

Conceiving of urban space as a set of territories is not, then, part of an attempt to replace these understandings of urban planning. The idea of the urban plan as a *process*, which emerges from many of these studies (Creekmore and Fisher 2014), is a key component of thinking through territories. Rather, we seek to provide a new spatial understanding of the town which is not reducible to the plan itself, but is linked to the ways that the townscape was lived in, exploited and connected to broader landscapes (territories) of action. At Songo Mnara, these connections are defined via particular sets of activities, sometimes linked to physical places – mosques, tombs, stables – and sometimes defined by natural resources or physical features of the broader landscape – fishing grounds/reefs, forested/brushy/agricultural zones. Mapping this connectivity via a series of territories of action provides a useful means of framing differential boundaries of human practices within the material network of the town. The overlapping nature of these territories also alerts us to the complexity of urban life, defined through this diversity within and between houses and households.

The territories that we present here represent a series of defined spaces linked to certain activities or concerns of Songo Mnara's residents. First, we explore ritual territories of inclusion and exclusion, which are in many ways coterminous with the built townscape, although we explore them through the ritual production of space that seems to have been significant to the inhabitants. Second, we look at the ways that houses/households were linked to broader territories, near and far. Both these forms of territory have links to the ways elite status seems to have been negotiated, through the shaping of the townscape and through access to a broader range of territories and further connections. This echoes Monica Smith's (2003) evocation of towns as 'small worlds', hubs where a great range of long-distance connections come together, and convey prestige onto those who maintain them. Yet the third form of territory we discuss complicates this picture, as we have recognized other territories at Songo Mnara which unite varying portions of the town space and urban population. These territories seem to cross-cut some of the hierarchical patterning, and are linked to particular forms of craft activity and economic production.

## The Songo Mnara urban landscape project

Songo Mnara is a Swahili stone town with a rich and elegant townscape of coral-built mosques, tombs and houses. It lies on the north-western tip of the island of the same name, part of the Kilwa archipelago off the southern coast of Tanzania (Fig. 1). The site was occupied for a relatively brief period, from the late fourteenth to early sixteenth century AD. This corresponds with the



**Figure 1.** Map of eastern African coast, showing Kilwa archipelago.



**Figure 2.** View of Songo Mnara, showing ruins of Friday mosque.

golden age at Kilwa Kisiwani, the ninth–eighteenth-century stone town that occupies the adjacent island (Chittick 1974); Songo Mnara seems to have been an offshoot of Kilwa, best viewed as part of a dispersed urban development across the archipelago (Wynne-Jones 2016).

The sites of the Kilwa archipelago are part of the Swahili culture, based in settlements that dot the Indian Ocean coast of eastern Africa, and were connected to each other and to Indian Ocean networks from their earliest roots in the seventh century AD. By the fifteenth century, these sites were trading with partners in the Islamic world via the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, with African goods moving as far as India and China (Kusimba 1999). Swahili sites of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were complex, Islamic, urban centres – many of them with coral-built mosques, houses and tombs – accommodating both local and itinerant populations, and supported by a variety of relationships with a deeper hinterland. The site of Songo Mnara represents a particularly elaborate example of this tradition, with unparalleled investment in the architecture of this site (Fig. 2; Garlake 1966). It is not perhaps the ‘typical’ Swahili site – insofar as that exists – due to its short occupation, but this brief period of urban life makes the site perfect for explorations of activity and spatial practice. Vertical stratigraphy is minimal, with a single occupation horizon across the site, maximizing the potential for exploring spatial variation on a horizontal plane. Our research at the site has used a range of methodologies to produce layers of data that together form a picture of activities inside and outside the structures (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2010, 2013; Fleisher 2014; Wynne-Jones 2013). Geophysical survey, shovel-test pitting, off-site survey, systematic sampling for soil chemistry, phytoliths and macrobotanical information have been combined with open area excavations to build up a uniquely detailed picture of a Swahili stone town during the culture’s richest age.

### **Territories of Songo Mnara**

Songo Mnara, like all towns, was not internally homogeneous. Social diversity is a key defining feature of urbanism in the archaeological record, and might be understood as differentiation of (among other things) status, profession, religion or ethnicity. As well as recognizing diversity as a characteristic of the town writ large, we seek to map that diversity as it was manifest across space within the town in the relationships between houses and their landscape. Territories, which

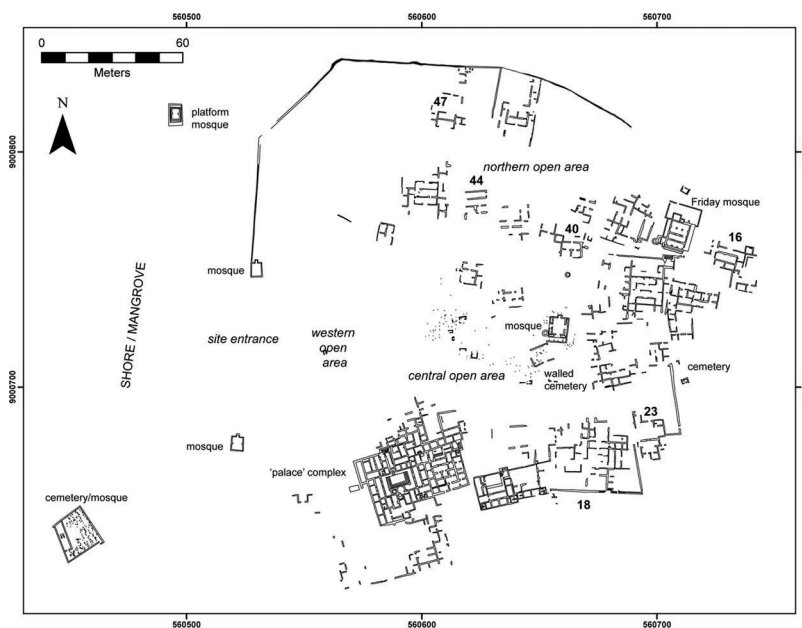
quantify the spatial parameters of associations and activities, allow us to demonstrate urban diversity empirically, and to explore the overlapping associations of particular households.

### *Ritual territories of inclusion and exclusion*

The built environment of the town (Fig. 3) creates two quite different territories. One is the community space of the town, defined by the town wall, cemeteries and mosques; these mark out an inclusive space linked to a religious community and to ancestral claims. A second set of territories is defined by the houses themselves, which create more exclusive, although not necessarily 'private' (Wynne-Jones 2013), internal worlds, linked to particular families or households. Both forms of territory were created through the built environment, but linked to ritual activities that reinforced those spaces as places with active associations. It is likely that both were intentionally created by the town's inhabitants: the majority of the population here (unlike at other Swahili sites) lived in the elaborate coral-built structures that make up the townscape. Construction may then be seen to reflect the priorities of the townspeople, further demonstrated through the place-making rituals conducted within the houses.

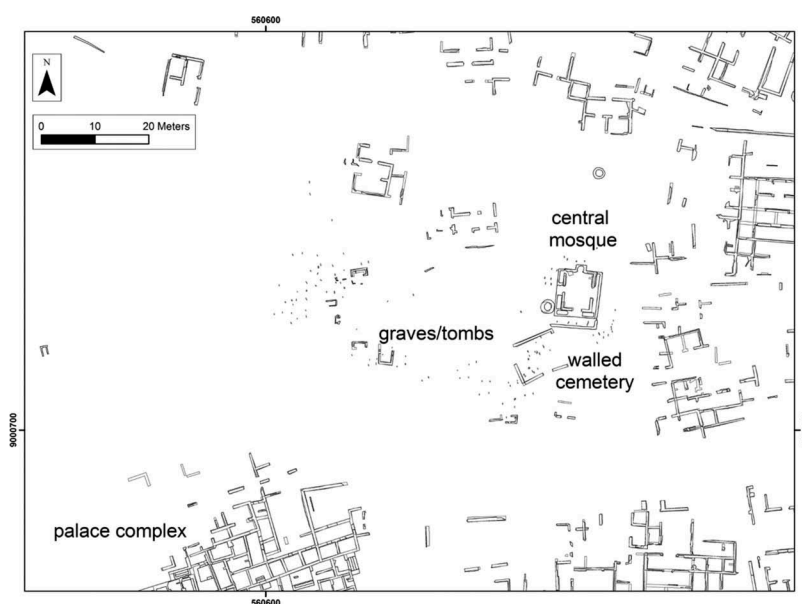
### *Cemeteries and ancestors*

Cemeteries at Songo Mnara offer insight into the ways that the residents created and marked urban territories through their interaction with ancestors. The first built space at Songo Mnara seems to have been a walled cemetery (Fig. 4). This is now associated with a mosque, but excavations in 2011 showed that the graveyard came first, and its northern wall was repositioned to accommodate construction of the mosque. The walled graveyard lies now within the 'central open area' of the site, surrounded by dozens of other graves and tombs; these may likewise have pre-dated the town, or may be evidence of ongoing burial. In either case, the cemetery had an



**Figure 3.** Map of Songo Mnara, showing features mentioned in text and house numbers.





**Figure 4.** Central open area of the site, with walled cemetery and mosque.

important role in shaping the townscape: it was not only centrally located, but served as a focal point for the houses and buildings that surrounded it (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2012). Houses at the site respected the open space around the graves, and were built with large monumental staircases with benches at the top of the stairs, all facing towards the central cemetery (Fleisher 2014, 16–17). The construction of surrounding houses thus not only respected the integrity of this locale, but saw residents managing the visual landscape to ensure its prominence and importance in the daily life of the town.

As well as the large central cemetery, additional burial areas can be found in the northern part of the town, associated with the congregational mosque; to the south west adjacent to a mosque set on a bluff; and just outside the town walls to the north and to the east (Fig. 3). Most contain only simple sandstone head- and footstones, although the eastern cemetery includes some tombs as well as sandstone markers. Thus the locations of cemeteries have the effect of both ‘centring’ and encircling the town, extending out in all directions save the south, delineating a spatial extent to this ancestral territory.

Excavations in the spaces surrounding the graves and tombs (Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2012; Fleisher 2014) have recovered artefacts related to the material practice of burying the dead, and also to the ongoing commemoration of ancestors at grave’s edge. These include the construction of walled tomb markers after interment (sometimes remembering the location of the inhumations somewhat inaccurately), the placement of plants such as palm fronds to mark graves (seen clearly in the phytolith evidence: Sulas and Madella 2012), the possible burning of offerings (food or incense) and the deposition of memorial objects including quartz pebbles and locally minted coins.

The memorialization of ancestors may have been linked to status. There were clearly more and less prominent locations in the town for burial, and commemoration occurred on different scales. One grave, for example, was marked by over 5,000 quartz pebbles deposited on its surface, while others had only ceramic vessels or single coins. Interment and ongoing memorialization can



therefore be seen as part of a claim to place, and to ancestry. The links between burials and claims to territory are well established in archaeology (e.g. Chapman 1995; Shepardson 2005). In an African context the power of burial – merging people and soil in a particular place – has been well explored in relation to claims of autochthony and belonging (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). Yet the ongoing nature of Songo Mnara's relationship with the dead suggests a continuing role for the ancestors within the town through the affective presence of their graves. The centrality of the dead within the town, with inhabitants overlooking their graves and walking between them for daily tasks such as visiting the well or the mosque, would have had the effect of presencing those ancestors in the day-to-day life of the town (Crossland 2014; Insoll 2015, 78–114). Fontein (2011) has also argued that the materiality of graves and tombs can give them a form of secondary agency, as they affect social obligations and mediate action. The offerings and graveside activities might therefore be seen in terms of an ongoing relationship with ancestors who were part of urban life and whose territories created particular spaces in the urban setting.

### *Mosques and community spaces*

Further community spaces were created by the encircling town wall, which enclosed a series of open spaces as well as the houses of the site. The entrance to the site was to the west, where a gap in the town wall would have led out to the shore (access to the water is now hampered by mangrove). The face that Songo Mnara turned to the outside world was of a line of mosques, from the 'Mnara' or tower in the north to the graveyard mosque on the hill just south west of the town wall. All seem to have been constructed so as to be visible from the sea (see also Pollard 2008). The town entrance was flanked by two small mosques; only one has been excavated but it seems that the entrance was outside the wall, suggesting that it catered for visitors. The mosques would have created a sense of entering an Islamic community, defining the urban territory by their presence. Within the site, two further mosques would have provided for community prayer, including a prominent central mosque near the graveyard and the largest congregational mosque.

Thus, community territories were created (apparently intentionally) by architecture, and linked to elements of Islamic practice and funerary ritual. These ongoing practices would have redefined these territories on an ongoing basis. Although they contained elements of status negotiation, these were also inclusive territories, part of the way the urban landscape was defined.

### *Houses*

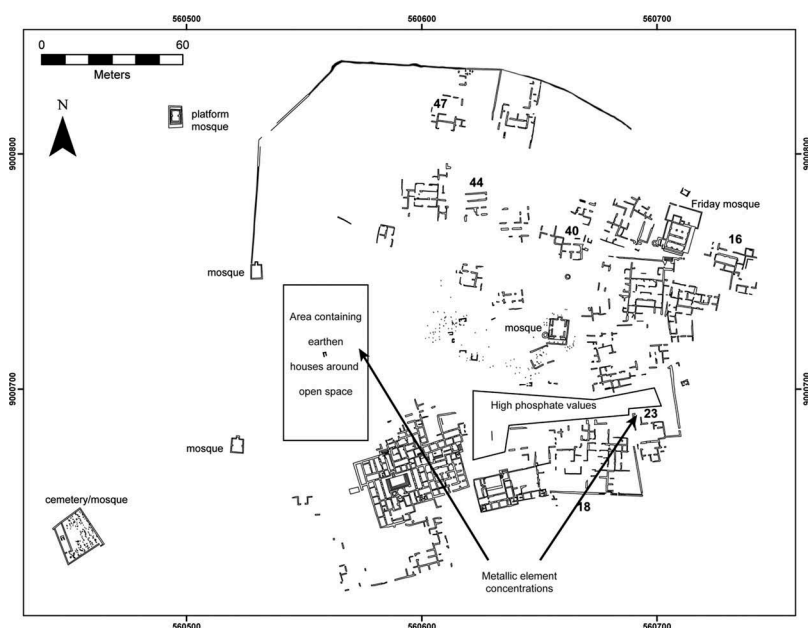
The houses, in contrast, deliberately created more exclusive spaces. The coral-built architecture of Songo Mnara included dozens of houses for families or extended households. These seem to have been places for hospitality and public consumption as well as private dwellings, but they were nonetheless exclusive worlds, limited by ownership and invitation (Wynne-Jones 2013). The spaces of the house were also the setting for place-making rituals. In particular, a series of buried offerings have been recovered through archaeology here. Buried pots (*mafingo*) containing offerings have been found in the entrance rooms of all houses; they are thought to offer ritual protection for the house. In addition, valuable objects were buried as a series of structured deposits in the foundations of the houses, including a coin hoard of over 360 local copper coins and a carnelian necklace (Perkins, Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2014), a hoard of eight large aragonite beads and an iron axe-head in a ceramic bowl. These investments in the foundations of the house might be viewed as an alternative form of place-making, investing value into the houses and, by inference, the family or lineage associated with them.

### Connected places: maritime and agricultural territories

Other territories extended beyond the town walls, connecting town residents to maritime and agricultural areas. The maritime territory can be recognized on a variety of scales. The island of Songo Mnara is part of a small archipelago in a drowned estuary and the other islands are easily reached by boat. The connections between these islands are most readily apparent in the similarities of architectural style and material assemblage between the larger town of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara, but other seagoing connections would have linked the island to the mainland, to the other islands in the archipelago and to a wider world of Indian Ocean trade. The archipelago itself is a sort of dispersed urban network, with towns on three of the islands and isolated structures such as mosques on others (Pradines and Blanchard 2005; Wynne-Jones 2016).

In addition, the coastline and reefs of Songo Mnara Island would have offered myriad resources to be exploited by the town, including fish, shellfish, mangrove and coral. The maritime landscape of Songo Mnara was augmented by architecture such as causeways that extended into the ocean, which created a territory of exploitation around the town (Pollard, Fleisher and Wynne-Jones 2012). The maritime territory also extended into the town: geochemical testing in the western open area of the site has shown clear concentrations of sodium and calcium in the maintained space immediately inside the gate (Fig. 5). This is suggestive of the use of this area for maritime pursuits: drying nets, fish or seaweed; processing marine products; possibly the manufacture of shell beads (Fleisher and Sulas 2015).

The marine environment was literally built into the urban space through the use of a marine animal – coral – for the construction of houses, mosques and tombs at Songo Mnara (Fleisher et al. 2015). *Porites* coral was particularly favoured for ornamental features; it is found in the shallow waters of the coral reef just off the coast. This fringing reef was also the source of the majority of fish eaten at Songo Mnara, which included both shallow-water species and a high quantity of shellfish (Quintana Morales 2013). The majority of bony fish consumed at Songo Mnara (99 per



**Figure 5.** Map of Songo Mnara, showing features identified through testing.

cent) were from shallower waters, although these were diverse habitats, including reefs, estuary, mangrove (Quintana Morales 2013, 181). Dugong bones have also been found in the middens; these too can be hunted in the shallow reef. These waters were probably part of the daily round of activity for the townspeople. In this way, the maritime territory did not stop at the shore but extended into the town through activities conducted there.

The residents of Songo Mnara's houses also interacted with a broader terrestrial zone of agricultural exploitation on the island itself. The botanical and phytolith evidence suggests that households were very directly connected to agricultural practice, and that crop processing was a household task, carried out within the spaces of even the grandest houses of the town (Sulas and Madella 2012; Wynne-Jones 2013). Ethnographic studies on the Swahili coast have described complex systems of land tenure, both garden plots within town and villages and agricultural land beyond their boundaries. These are subject to ownership by families and clans, mediated through the ownership of the trees that grow upon them (Middleton 1961; Caplan 1975). A similar system may have operated in the past; certainly, it seems that households were directly engaged in agricultural production, which would have tied them to a territory beyond the walls of the town. Archaeological survey on Songo Mnara Island indicates that there was activity on the island beyond the walls of the town, but few areas of permanent settlement (Pawlowicz and Dobbs *n. d.*), indicative of an agricultural landscape into which the residents of Songo Mnara would have ventured daily.

These connections with land and sea beyond the town limits constitute nested scales of activity, representing territories of exploitation for all the town's inhabitants. The use of communal public spaces for some activities suggests that the whole community participated in these activities. There are, however, some ways that particular households can be seen to have had connections with more distant territories.

Among the fish remains, there was a substantial sample ( $n = 415$ ) of cartilaginous fish such as shark and ray which would have required journeys into deeper water (Quintana Morales 2013, 179); this represents both a different technology of fishing, using more expensive equipment such as long lines and drift gill-netting (Quintana Morales and Horton 2014), and the incorporation of a new territory into the urban world. Instead of the near-shore zone that was most likely part of the daily arena of activity at Songo Mnara, for both fishing and shellfish-collecting, access to deep-water fish was created via a more specific and directed activity. That activity seems to have been a specialized pursuit, producing foodstuffs accessed by only a section of the population; remains of deep-water fish were disproportionately concentrated in the grander houses (Table 1).

The maritime and agricultural territories of Songo Mnara connected the life of the town into a variety of activities on a number of different spatial scales. These territories were important for the food supply of the town – providing crops, pasturage, fish and other goods from the sea. But they also were probably territories in which elite status was negotiated, with access to plots of land and to the deeper sea controlled by particular families.

The control of these aspects of local territories intersected, of course, with the way that Swahili elites managed other more distant connections in the larger Indian Ocean world. In comparison to

**Table 1.** Fish remains from a sample of houses at the site, showing differences between coral and earthen houses.

House	MNI	Richness	NISP (Offshore/Near shore)	Est. W count
23 (coral)	119	13	94/161	155
44 (coral)	424	19	151/736	709
Earthen houses	15	7	15/18	18

other Swahili towns, there are surprisingly few imported ceramics located in the deposits at Songo Mnara, but the ability to access such goods was clearly valued. One of the grander houses in the southern part of the site contains a room with a barrel-vault ceiling inset with more than 100 imported Persian bowls. This echoes similar architectural features at Kilwa Kisiwani, where the excavator suggested the particular set of bowls was ordered as a special consignment (Chittick 1974, 306–8). This evokes not just long-distance connections, but a personal line of communication with production centres and foreign markets. Objects displaying these networks are a key feature of the ways that M. L. Smith (2003) has suggested we might recognize the ‘small world’ characteristics of early towns, which created cosmopolitan settings through presencing distant networks through material goods.

### ***Territories of production***

A further set of territories at Songo Mnara is linked to craft-working and production. Some of these territories are within the town itself, creating specific associations among structures at the site linked to participation in certain forms of production, such as animal keeping/processing, spinning thread and bead making. These territories differ from the community territories in that they draw distinctions between households: elite and non-elite houses were linked by specialized forms of production.

Enhanced phosphate values in the archaeological sediments can be seen around the doorways of stone houses along the southern edge of the town, adjoining the central open area (Fig. 5). These suggest the stabling of animals around these houses, likely to be sheep/goat due to the prevalence of these animals in the faunal remains. Further, the highest concentration of sheep/goat remains outside a midden is to be found in SM013, an excavation unit immediately outside the door of a stone house (House 23) in the south east of the site. Sheep/goat bones were also present in significant numbers inside the house. Soil chemistry has shown peaks of metallic elements (Ag, Co, Cr) outside the door of this house and around the exterior of an earthen house to the west (Wynne-Jones and Sulas [forthcoming](#)). These are enigmatic, but could be related to pigment use, or possibly to tanning of leather. The southern stone houses, then, seem to have been linked to the keeping of small stock – unlike their neighbours to the north – and specific locales for the production of leather may have been located next to particular houses, both earth and stone.

Elsewhere, certain houses are linked by association with different crafts. Spindle whorls, for the manufacture of cotton thread, are a common feature of archaeology at Songo Mnara, as at neighbouring Kilwa Kisiwani (Fig. 6). The evidence at Songo Mnara suggests production occurred inside the houses and in the spaces immediately outside, creating territories of economic production that incorporated and transcended the household unit (Wynne-Jones 2013). Yet not all houses were alike. Spindle whorls were disproportionately concentrated in only some of the houses excavated. For example, concentrations of spindle whorls have been found in Houses 16, 44, 47 and 23, all stone houses. House 18, in contrast, was fully excavated but contained few spindle whorls, suggesting the inhabitants were not part of this production group. It seems, therefore, that household production was quite specialized, tying together *particular* houses and their inhabitants, and linking them to another broad landscape of growing cotton, as well as perhaps to a larger network of the production and trade in cloth.

What is also striking in these data is the relative absence of thread production in contexts related to earthen houses – this form of production was largely relegated to a specific set of stone



**Figure 6.** Terracotta spindle whorls and aragonite beads from 2011 excavations.

houses. Excavations in three earthen houses in the western open area – with two trenches that each exposed the majority of an earthen house – have revealed only small numbers of spindle whorls. In contrast, bead production seems to have occurred in and around the earthen houses. The clearest concentration of bead-production debris is in the wattle-and-daub domestic structures excavated on the edges of the western open area (Fleisher and Sulas 2015) and in the surrounding spaces. Additionally, one earthen house excavated contained a rich assemblage of debris related to the production of beads from giant clam shells (aragonite). This included material from all stages of production, from reduction to drilling to finishing, and represents the only context at the site with such debris. This does create an interesting link, though, with House 40, a stone house that contained a foundation deposit of eight enormous aragonite beads (Fig. 6). These were on a different scale from the small beads being produced in the earthen house, yet suggest a connection between the inhabitants of House 40 and that industry. Landscapes of production at Songo Mnara thus produce links between particular houses and spaces that cut across some of the other territorial associations. These reflect a form of specialized household production at the site. There may also have been particular households linked to other crafts such as metalworking, but these are harder to identify as they occurred beyond the confines of the houses themselves. By exploring these territories of activity and production, we are able to begin seeing the complexity of urban space, in which houses were tied to the townscape in multiple overlapping ways.

## Discussion

Urban territories at Songo Mnara therefore allow us to map connections between groups, activities and spaces in some very specific ways. The territories themselves are related to practices, ritual and economic, which served to include, exclude and connect people in the urban landscape. It is thus possible to map these practices in ways that go beyond generalizations about scales of connectivity, or functional characterization of space and place. Instead, territories united structures and landscapes in contingent ways, which built up into the diversity of urban life.

At Songo Mnara, we have identified a series of territories within the town. Some draw the community together, as with the ritual territories defined by mosques and tombs which to some extent define the space of the town around these shared possessions and the practices of prayer and memorialization. Ancestors also function as territorial markers to create more exclusive family ties to place; houses had a similar function, and the investment in place that they represented is embodied in the structured deposits found beneath house floors. These twin themes of inclusivity and exclusivity were complicated by other realms of activity, notably the territories of specialized production that tied together particular households and groups.

Beyond the town, territories of activity drew Songo Mnara into island and regional connections. These included the zone of agricultural and marine exploitation that supplied the food needs of the town, but there are also indications that certain island/regional territories may have been preferred, because, for example, of the ability to fish deep waters or to grow, access and process cotton. What is notable again is that particular households and groups can be tied to certain territories of activity, either by their consumption of deep-water fish, or by their ability to access consignments of glazed ceramics from the Persian Gulf. Both suggest individual or household territories of connection that add to the complex mix of urban life. The town, as a dispersed and discontinuous composite of economic, ritual, political and conceptual territories, is a distinctive setting precisely because of this diversity. It is hoped that by connecting houses to landscape via the thick layers of a territorial approach, we might provide a richer understanding of the nature of past urban life.

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## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributors

**Stephanie Wynne-Jones**, PhD, 2005, University of Cambridge, is currently a *Pro Futura Scientia* Research Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, affiliated with the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University. She has been a lecturer at the University of York since 2011. Her work focuses on the archaeology of the Swahili coast of East Africa and particularly on the role of material culture. She is co-director of the Songo Mnara Urban Landscape Project, focusing on the uses of space in and around the houses at the site.

**Jeffrey Fleisher**, PhD, 2003, University of Virginia, is Associate Professor at Rice University, Houston, Texas. His research on the ancient Swahili has focused on the role of rural and non-elite people in the context of urban development and the use of material culture in the construction of power and authority. His current research at Songo Mnara focuses on the social uses of open space.

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